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978-1-107-66504-0 - "Render unto Caesar": Religious and Political Loyalty in Palestine

Herbert Loewe

Excerpt

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## “RENDER UNTO CAESAR”

TO many people perhaps the most significant element in the Coronation Service is the lesson from the Gospel, with its clear-cut pronouncement that every man owes allegiance both to his God and to his king. This Gospel lesson explains, in unambiguous words, the significance of the symbolic act performed by the Archbishop. Before the crown is placed on the Sovereign's head, his subjects are told that their loyalty to him is not incompatible with their duty to God: on the contrary, these two loyalties belong to separate, independent but congruent spheres: to both loyalties man is bound. Jesus does not here speak of their possible incompatibility; for example, of the duty of a subject whose king bids him apostatise. He is thinking of normal conditions, when subject and sovereign alike are believers or when the sovereign, if not a believer, at least remains neutral and does not proscribe belief in God or the free exercise of religion.

That the congruence of these two loyalties is not always simple and obvious to-day may be seen from the circumstance that during the Coronation year an Oecumenical Congress of many branches of the Christian Church met at Oxford to discuss the relation of Church and State, that is to say, the subject of this parable of Jesus. We have no reason to assume

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that when Jesus made his pronouncement, circumstances were so different from those prevailing now that no problem of adjusting the two allegiances existed. There can have been few periods in the world's history when compatibility was universal, easy and uncontroversial. In our own days the mutual relations of Church and State are the subject of more divergence of opinion than is aroused by any other question. It would not be an over-statement to affirm that on this question the issues of peace and war ultimately hinge. In some totalitarian countries, like Russia or Germany, the Church has been abolished or completely subjected to the State. In others, like Italy or Turkey, it is controlled. The Pope cannot or does not dissent from the Duce nor can the Imams disobey the Ghazi. In semi-totalitarian countries, such as Ireland or pre-Republican Spain, the Church was supreme. Mr de Valera's policy is in accord with ecclesiastical guidance. Here the Church dominates the State. In democratic countries, such as our own, or France, the United States, Scandinavia or Holland, equality prevails. The Church, using the term in the widest sense to include all religions, is free and so is the State. Which of these three attitudes is the right one? Which did Jesus, by his parable, advocate? And which did his contemporaries advocate?

Now the Gospel lesson is generally interpreted to mean that Jesus broke new ground. It is commonly said, indeed taken for granted, that his teaching was something novel, something antithetical to the

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traditions of his environment: that Jesus's contemporaries confused these two issues: that they were disloyal: that the question put to Jesus was a trap, a political manoeuvre rather than an appeal for guidance. Such, indeed, is the impression which the records of the incident by the Synoptic Evangelists would convey. When the verses of Matthew were read by the Archbishop and transmitted by the wireless, one listener, at all events, felt the need to re-examine them, for they seemed to call for some exegesis and for some qualification. A piece of ethical teaching, of fundamental and abiding importance, seemed to be hedged with obvious contradictions and inconsistencies. An attempt at readjustment seemed called for. The present note represents an endeavour to outline some of the difficulties contained in the parable and to offer suggestions towards their solution. Whether these suggestions prove acceptable or not, the difficulties themselves must be faced. Other answers may be preferable to those which are given hereafter.

The examination of the question involves a consideration of four main heads:

A. The loyalty of the Jews towards their political overlords; the Rabbinic teaching about loyalty. (I) Theory; (II) Practice.

B. Taxation and its relation to loyalty.

C. The coin symbol used by Jesus and its importance.

D. The application of the foregoing to the interpretation of the Gospel records.

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## A. THE LOYALTY OF THE JEWS AND RABBINIC TEACHING

### I. THEORY

As regards the difficulties contained in the parable, it will perhaps be more satisfactory not to present them now in detail but to approach the subject constructively, in the order just mentioned. They will then be seen gradually to emerge, as the subject is treated. For the moment it suffices to remark first that the teaching "Render unto Caesar" was, in its widest form, not an innovation, but that it was strictly in line with Rabbinic and biblical teaching. Secondly, "Render unto Caesar", as it stands, considers only one, or at most two, aspects of a question that is very far from simple. Yet it is just the complexities that call for discussion. It is when the irresistible force meets the immovable body that reconciliation is needed. To assert that these two terms are mutually exclusive, and that, as both cannot exist, it follows that there is no real problem, may be true dialectically: historically, it is false. History shows us innumerable examples of the clash of loyalties. On the one side, there is the justifiable opposition of religion to social injustice, to idolatry and to tyranny: on the other, there is intrigue

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disguised in ecclesiastical vestments. True prophets have risen against oppressors and pseudo-prophets against lawful sovereigns. Each side has invoked scriptural authority. Who can judge the issue? Was Dr Clifford right in suffering imprisonment rather than pay his education rate to Caesar? Was the Pope justified in presenting a golden rose to the Queen of Italy as a recognition of her title "Empress of Ethiopia"? And John Knox? Did he render unto Mary Queen of Scots what was her due? And, further back still, did not Elijah claim divine sanction for his anointing of Jehu to overthrow the House of Ahab?

We must not assume either that Caesar's due is always compatible with God's or that the tyrant is always the idolator. Among the idolatrous kings, there have been worthy rulers: among the orthodox kings, oppressors have been known.

In the course of this investigation, it is necessary at the outset to set limits to the scope of inquiry. On the one side, medieval Rabbinic evidence must be excluded almost entirely. The views of Maimonides, Judah hal-Levi, Abravanel and similar philosophers, are, in one way, of great interest in this connection. But their evidence is retrospective, in a sense. They tell us what their ideal form of government was; they differ as to the merits of monarchy and democracy; they may, broadly speaking, be said to agree on the question of political loyalty. But what they have to say represents their impressions of what a God-fearing patriot's duty should have been in the past

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and of what it should continue to be, in the present and future: what it actually was, as we would know from History, we cannot necessarily gather from these sources, since it is not their purpose to give us this information.

And in the other direction, when we look backwards, a certain care must be exercised in citations from the Bible. What help can be derived from the very large amount of material that is contained in Scripture? In the first place, we must remember that Rabbinic teaching includes it and presupposes it. This has to be mentioned because the Rabbis did not always repeat every piece of biblical evidence: they took it for granted. Hence to-day there is sometimes a tendency to divorce the Old Testament material from Judaism, not, indeed, consciously, but none the less effectively. Sometimes this forgetfulness is partial. It is remembered that Elijah supported Jehu, but it is forgotten that he ran before Ahab. Sometimes the Old Testament is treated, again unconsciously, as an exclusively Christian possession.

Secondly, we shall find that Rabbinic teaching preferred the latter incident just cited and neglected the former. When the Rabbis ransacked the Bible for historical precedent, they chose for their lessons those stories which inculcated loyalty. The others they always endeavoured to modify and explain away. Rebellion was the sin of witchcraft.

Thirdly, in dealing with the Bible, we can treat it as a complete volume. Critical questions of date and

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authorship do not concern us in the least. True it is, that the Canon was not closed till the days of Akiba, that various grades of inspiration were said to differentiate the three main divisions of Scripture, that the authority of the Hagiographa, sometimes called Kabbalah, was not conceded without controversy. In spite of all these facts, the separate books of Holy Writ with which the Rabbis were concerned were, to all intents, our own. Consequently we are at liberty to speak of Genesis and not of the E or J documents. We have to deal with the literature as it lay before the Rabbis, not to consider its origins. This means that we have to treat Canticles and Proverbs on the assumption that they were the work of the wise King of Israel, the beloved of the LORD, the King whose very name signified peace and whose reign typified prosperity. What these books have to say about the mutual relation of king and people is therefore of considerable importance.

The Bible is familiar to theological students; hence it does not demand detailed examination. The Rabbinic material, being less accessible, deserves more consideration. Before proceeding to this material, only a few general facts in the biblical sources call for mention.

Samuel regarded the popular clamour for a king as sinful, as being tantamount to a rejection of God. But this attitude was of little practical significance. Vastly more important was the Deuteronomic command to appoint a king. It was reinforced by the

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emphasising infinitive absolute, *som tasim*, "Thou shalt surely appoint a king".<sup>1</sup> The kingship was of divine ordinance, and the royal claim to allegiance had God's sanction.<sup>2</sup> On these two different conceptions in Samuel and Deuteronomy, the views of the medieval Jewish philosophers are of extreme interest, but they cannot be considered here. Those who desire further information should turn to Dr L. Strauss's lecture on Abravanel's political theory and its contrast with that of Maimonides.<sup>3</sup>

If the advocates of the British-Israel theory were concerned to point out spiritual affinities and real historical parallels, they would support their contentions more effectively than by inserting in *The Times* full-page diagrams at £1000 each of the interior of the great Pyramid. Between the ordinances of Deuteronomy and the British Constitution there is, in fact, a striking resemblance. Both systems presuppose a divine right of kings: both systems presuppose God-fearing kings. The king in Deuteronomy is to read in the Book of the Law of the LORD all the

<sup>1</sup> For the two conceptions (Samuel and Deuteronomy), cf. *Tos. Šan.* IV, § 5, p. 421, lines 5 ff.

<sup>2</sup> In the Talmud the view of Samuel is almost ignored: the attitude of Deuteronomy prevails. Attempts are made to explain away Samuel's reproaches. Thus, in *T.B. Šan.* 20b, on I Sam. VIII, 6 and 20, R. Eliezer said: "The Elders of the generation asked for a king properly (כְּהוֹנֵן) saying, 'Give us a king to rule over us' [i.e. for purposes of discipline]. But the baser folk (*amme ha'ares*) among them cavilled [or, taught corruptly: קללקל], saying, 'Let us be like other nations' [i.e. let us have a monarchy for reasons of assimilation]."

<sup>3</sup> *Isaac Abravanel, Six Lectures...*, edited by J. B. Trend and H. Loewe, Cambridge, 1937, pp. 93 ff.



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days of his life, that he prolong his days in the midst of his brethren. His late Majesty King George V read a chapter of the Bible daily and was spared to prolong his life. For he celebrated his semi-Jubilee amid the universal love of his subjects, whom he claimed as brethren, being, as he said, the father of a widespread family. The king in Deuteronomy is to be one of his people's brethren. The Deuteronomic king is warned to avoid unsuitable marriages. This raises the interesting question of the unworthy king. Now it is remarkable that Deuteronomy contemplates two contingencies, that of a false prophet and that of a perverted city; the contingency of an unworthy king is not contemplated. It is regarded as unlikely, if not as impossible. Even in later times it was the priest who might be false to his trust, rather than the king. So Malachi says: "For the lips of the priest shall guard knowledge and Torah shall they seek from his mouth." But the Rabbis translated the first word, *ki*, not as "for" but as "if" or "when". They interpreted the verse thus: "When the priest's lips guard knowledge, *then* shall they seek Torah from his mouth: since", as the verse continues, "he is the messenger of the LORD of Hosts. But when his lips do not guard knowledge, then shall the people not seek Torah from his mouth." In the case of the king there is no such qualification.<sup>1</sup> The references to kings in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes generally assume the king to be worthy.

<sup>1</sup> See below, p. 15.

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Yet, human nature being what it is, unworthy kings did arise. When this happened, prophets were not dumb. Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah were outspoken enough: Solomon's shortcomings, David's sin, were openly rebuked. However, when doom was pronounced, it was the LORD's doom. He would inflict it. The prophet of the LORD would not prophesy smooth things to suit the royal command, either of an Ahab or of a Jeroboam II. But such reprimands as Micaiah's were not incitements to rebellion nor intrigues, although of these, too, the Bible furnishes examples. Nathan's reproof of David may be compared with the words of the Primate of all England in the controversy over the king's marriage in 1936-7. And when Samuel pronounced the rejection of Saul, a special divine revelation was considered necessary. With the circumstances we are not now concerned: we are not dealing with the ethics of the command given to Saul to slaughter infants. The fact remains that the historian could not permit Samuel to take steps that would lead to the king's overthrow, without recording specific divine authority to do so. I do not remember that this story was ever selected by the Rabbis as an exemplar for future conduct.

When we come to examine kingship in later times, we shall have to consider four possible types of kings: Jewish kings, just and unjust; Gentile kings, just and unjust. For the purposes of the Gospel parable the first category, that of just Jewish kings, may be